The Jews of Iraq

Recalling a journey to the new Babylon

By David Sheena

Although I was young, I woke up one fateful morning in 1950 to sense around me the palpable panic and anxiety from the cruel trick of the Iraqi government which, at the last moment, froze the assets of the departing Jews. In an instant, they were rendered penniless.

Commentary

I was born in Baghdad, Iraq, into the world's oldest Jewish community, the community that gave us the all important institutions of the Babylonian Talmud, the liturgy and the synagogue of the people, as opposed to the Temple of the priests. This was the land of the prophet Ezekiel, Hillel, Saadia Gaon and many other luminaries of the post Biblical firmament, who helped insure the incredible survival of our people in exile.

As a child, I was not aware of the long and rich history of our people, but I was aware that I was comfortable, and a part of that people. Even so, I was keenly sensitive to our position as Jews in a Muslim country. We were educated, economically well-off, and part of the cultural elite of Iraq. Our life was rich and substantial, but we had to be discrete, watchful and inconspicuous. We could not expose our Judaism; there were no Jewish stars, no openly displayed Hebrew and our tallitot had no overtly Jewish symbols.

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I began to sense that something was not right, that all was not in place. I learned to keep quiet when rebuked for saying something "Jewish" too loudly. I felt around me the tangible fear as the witch hunt began for Zionists around 1949 and 1950.

I remember the vague apprehension that was felt everywhere and the stories being told around 1950 of houses being targeted for searches for any Zionist connection. I recall my mother and father sanitizing our house and burning anything that could be incriminating. It was obvious that this was the "revenge" of the Iraqis on the native "enemy" Jewish population; after all, the Iraqi Jew were also the people of Israel who had just humiliated Iraq – among other Arab countries – in Israel's War of Independence of 1948.

In 1950, after outbreaks of anti-Jewish riots, Iraqi Jews were compelled to renounce their citizenship and leave for "parts unknown" (Israel would never be publicly acknowledged to exist) under the law of "Surrender of Iraqi Nationality." After virtually the entire Jewish population registered to leave, the state froze all assets and property, effectively robbing the Jews of their life's savings. Only Israel was willing to rescue the Iraqi Jews during this "second exodus." The operation was dubbed "Operation Ezra and Nehemia," after the leaders of the Babylonian Jews who led them back to Israel after the Persian "liberation" in 539 B.C.E.

I left Baghdad, with my family in 1955, being among the last 6,000 Jews remaining in Iraq. They came to the new Babylon, to New York. It was such a surprise for me in America to first hear someone say publicly out loud: "give this to the Rabbi." That is when I knew I was in America.

David Sheena arrived in Boston in 1960, earned a Ph.D. from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is president of the Sephardic Congregation of New England, in Brookline. He is also president of IET Labs in West Roxbury.

To get involved in the JIMENA campaign, call (617) 457-8650.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Jewish Iraqis in Operation Ezra and Nehamiah.

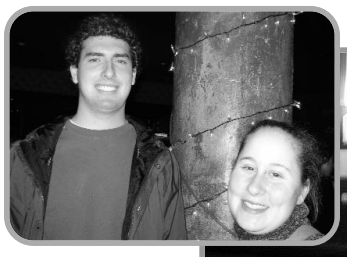
College Students

Y-Love Israeli Hip Hop Night

Israel Campus Roundtable

Hundreds of college students from campuses across the region turned out last Tuesday night for Israeli Hip Hop Night at Boston's Paradise Lounge. Front-and-center was Y-Love, whose Jewish rap incorporates Yiddish, Aramaic and English, accompanied by his right-hand men dj handler and Jake Break. The theme of the night was "Free the 3" and the students took home T-shirts in solidarity with the three kidnapped Israeli soldiers.













Israeli Hip Hop Night was sponsored by the Israel Campus Roundtable (co- convened by CJP, JCRC, and the Hillel Council of New England) and Students for Israel at Northeastern. All profits went to CJP's Israel in Crisis Fund.
To find out more about the Israel Campus Roundtable, visit www.israelcampusroundtable.org